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ABSTRACT

The author discusses the ego development of the troubled youngster in the classroom and how teachers can use this knowledge to help him reduce his self defeating and negative attitudes to learning and relating. (LS)

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CHAPTER TWO

UNDERSTANDING THE TROUBLED YOUNGSTER IN THE CLASSROOM (Cont'd.)

by

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THE TROUBLED YOUNGSTER IN THE CLASSROOM

by

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My concern in this chapter is with the understanding of the ego development of the troubled youngster in the classroom, and how teachers can use this knowledge to help him reduce his self-defeating and negative attitudes to learning and relating.

The troubled youngster, as stated previously, is a youngster in conflict. He is at odds with himself and those around him. More specifically, he has experienced faulty ego development during the early formative year of his life. These childhood years form the essential structure for his differentiation of himself from the world outside of him. As he attempts to differentiate his "self" from his "non-self", he experiences all types of frustrations, disappointments and deprivations. The intensity, frequency, and degree of these unrewarding experiences frequently heighten his feelings of helplessness; they become the framework for later disturbing anxiety. This takes the form of over- or under-activity, talkative or wandering behaviors. Also, when deprivations and disappointments thwart the competent development of the child's "ego" or self-system, he invariably becomes poorly adept at differentiating between what is and what is not himself. Pain and anger may result and are likely to be reacted to with avoidance of, or hostility towards, closeness with significant people and objects in his environment. Relatedness with parents and teachers, food, clothing, play activities, and things in general are apt to be disrupted. It is not unusual, therefore, to find that these children as they develop from childhood into adolescence, withdraw from, or react impulsively to, sustained relationship with people, books, learning, and/or socially desirable behaviors. Their experienced frustrations often fill these children with fear of contact. The realness or meaningfulness of people and things, their trust and confidence in themselves and others break down. The latter can be characterized as phenomena that impinge upon them from

their reactions to other people and/or a considerable variety of perceptual and learning experiences. These youngsters, therefore, come to school with a deficient physical sense of self, and with many deep emotional needs that they have never had satisfied. In a sense, their experiences have programmed them to relate to their world as non-giving, and as a projection of their own feelings of emptiness.

THE "WORLD IS MY OYSTER" POINT OF VIEW

Youngsters who are troubled, and exposed to frustrations and deprivations that mobilize such ego deficiency become youngsters who are ego-centric. They operate frequently on the unspoken principle:

> "We do what we want, when we want, to whom we want, and how we want. As long as we want something, we must have it and we will not let anyone stand between us and our goal. Other people must anticipate what we want and fulfill our needs..everything evolves around us."

It is not too difficult to see that this level of thinking is representative of the infantile or wish fulfilling thinking of a very young child, and is inappropriate for a youngster older than six years of age. The youngster with ego deficiency, therefore, needs protection against the anxiety which he experiences from his inner needs and feelings, and that which is created by the demands of others and their expectations of him. To make excuses for his behavior, to reassure him of successes of being liked when he experiences failures and unlikeableness do more harm than good. It in fact reinforces his denial of his problems or experiences, and intensifies his suspicions and distrust of himself and others.

The role of the teacher in relating to this type of youngster, therefore, is to basically understand that for the most part at least the youngster does not consciously want to reject the teacher's help and attention. Since his experiences have left him deprived and frustrated, why should he now feel that anyone wants to fulfill and gratify his needs. When teachers persist in meeting the

need they identify, but which the youngster has not learned to experience as gratifiable, or possible of being met, the troubled youngster becomes more troublesome.. his resistance to the teacher's best effort often multiplies. Reaching these youngsters is an extremely demanding and energy depleting task. More so is this the case because the teacher constantly must prove himself the obverse of what has become an integral part of the youngster's distorted perceptual style and relatedness. Often, the teacher who is dedicated is forced into a bind because the youngsters express feelings of suspiciousness about him and the sincerity of his efforts and concerns.

Sometimes these youngsters view the teacher's efforts at trying to help them learn as stemming from ulterior motives. This is likely to be a projection which is not limited to the teacher, but generalized from their distrust of the actions or feelings of others, including parents. The situation is more clearly seen as follows: "When you, my teacher, offer me help, I distrust you and my ability to take from you because my previous contacts with people always promised but deprived me; I have learned, therefore, to avoid and/or resist whatever you offer me as coming from your goodness or, as for my own good." There is thus a negative reaction to a positive action described as Malevolent Transformation. However, this does not preclude a response where a youngster's negative action gains him an insensitive, negative reaction from his teacher. The latter can take the position of not caring. The faulty understanding about the youngster's attitude places the teacher in the role of joining forces with that part of him that is not close to his level of awareness. For example, it is like ignoring the positive things he says or does, and relating to the negative ones. At times, we therefore may reverse the process of his unconscious desire to be understood by not joining forces with his overt expression of negativism and rebelliousness. This counters his resistance, since both teacher and student are on the same wavelength; both are negatively or positively tuned in. The troubled youngster is more than likely turned on by this bit of reverse psychology, since it takes the starch out of his resistance movement. One way by which this is done is by refocussing on the teacher's goal, and

not being detracted by the student's game to gain the upper hand, or attention for inappropriate behavior.

The troubled youngster in a psychotherapeutic, educational setting responds more favorably to this approach than to the directive oppositional classroom approach to his way of relating. The therapist, rather than becoming an adversary, serves as a benign, definite protective agent. The therapist's consistency, dauntlessness and persistence in setting limits heightens the troubled youngster's identification with empathy for, and emulation of, the therapist over time. In part, this culminates from the youngster's need for a strong ego or identificatory figure upon whom the youngster can depend. We must relate to the basic weakness of the youngster's ego, and thus, to his need for an ego that can support him against his anxieties.

The troubled youngster needs to experience a firm though protective, guiding, nurturing type of relationship in preference to a demanding, punitive relationship in the therapeutic and classroom situations. A primary goal in therapy and in teaching is to have the youngster join the therapist's or teacher's team. When we accomplish this, he is ready to accept therapist or teacher in a collaborative struggle against his disturbing anxieties and chaotic feelings. The teacher or therapist becomes an ally rather than an adversary. However, based on his past experiences, he will revert to testing out the sincerity, strength, and consistency of his teacher or therapist..to determine whether he or she is weak as he fantasies and/or to justify his experienced feelings of rejection and deprivation, by an antagonistic behavior that can, in moments when the teacher or therapist is off guard, mobilize rejecting behavior on their part. If the therapist or teacher stands his ground, is consistent in his firmness and supportive, protective role, then this reaffirms the therapist or teacher as an object to identify with and as a loved, desirable person. Frequent testing out episodes, nevertheless, must be expected and the relationship with teacher or therapist depends on the latter's consistent behavior in the face of these severe tests the troubled youngster mobilizes to discredit the ego worth of the teacher or therapist as a desirable loved figure or parent surrogate.